



Are we doing young people a service or disservice? And does local church youth ministry work?

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Pam has been involved youth work for over 15 years, working within a local church ministry context as well as community-based youth work. In September 2016 Pam left her role as Project Manager of Linlithgow Young People's Project to take up the role of Youth and Community Work Programme Manager with SSCM, where she is responsible for student learning and development as youth work practitioners. Pam is also studying for a Masters degree in Urban Theology.

In this seminar, which explores the purpose of Christian youth work and ministry, the role of the Christian youth worker, and evidence of declining participation by 18–30s in church activities, we will raise some honest questions about the purpose of youth work in church. In the context of youth work we will also try to examine issues of adolescent rites of passage, behaviour management, and social control and what some of the implications might be for the mission and discipleship of young people.

First a bit about myself. I've only recently come to work at the Scottish School of Christian Mission. In the previous 15 years I was working, and then latterly managing at Linlithgow Young People's

Project. The Linlithgow Young People's Project was established some 25 years ago as an ecumenical venture. There was a recognition at that point of a need to do something for young people in the town, so the churches came together and out of that a new youth project was born.

At the start of the project there was a considerable demand for youth *justice* work. There was a court in the town, and various youth activities related to that took place under the auspices of the project. As time passed, the work started to become more established, funding core workers, and eventually developing into the project that it is today. It now has a drop-in community centre, a youth centre, and contributes to social education within the secondary school, in addition to mentoring and group work. Some of the activities were very adventurous, with outdoor sports and so on. Basically, if an opportunity came up with young people that offered the possibility of an engagement with them, then we would do our best to be involved in it.

Although it retained its Christian ethos over the years, the project eventually became a separate entity from the churches. On the other hand, a lot of effort was put into keeping the connection with the church. There is a strong relationship with the community and the work is predominantly community-based, but there remain transitions or doorways or bridges – however you wish to describe them – that often connect to the life of the local church.

Originally, the relationship was understood to be a partnership together, rather than one in which there was a constant involvement with the same young people. It was understood to be an open doorway. So, the work continued over the years with varying degrees of success.

Inevitably, we came to a point where it was time to look at what our identity actually was. Our core staff team all had an active faith, but the same could not be said of our volunteers or our sessional staff. The question then became, how do we build bridges with the young people who came to the project? They liked the various activities of the project – but how do we build authenticity into that relationship? Church and community are clearly different cultures, but how might we allow them to stray into the world of faith and church, to cross from one culture to the other?

We began to look at how to identify key people who might be able to bridge-build back to us. The plan was to endorse their role in our youth work, and then invite them to become part of our community. Some had a role within our outdoor activities, they came along to these activities, so we ran a special project called Game of Life. We discussed life skills from the very basics like making your bed onwards. We invited people from the church to have a voice in that so, for example, those young people involved could discuss sexual relationships or career development with people of faith. As time went by, church workers came to have a bigger role within the life of the project.

At the same time, we have seen young people transition from being only part of the youth project into being active members of worshipping church life. That, of course, was a big paradigm shift for those young people. It was as big a shift for the church community to know what to do with these young people who had had no previous experience of church and very little family support. So we worked very hard on that.

I now work for the Scottish School of Christian Mission, and my role is to oversee our youth and community students, who work predominantly within church contexts. I have come to this work, then, with a history behind me of community involvement that has a faith-base to it. Our students mainly work in a faith context. We see, however, that they are struggling with this question: How can we get young people with no history of faith to come and explore what it is to be in the church community? Some of these young students who have grown up in families who have brought them to church and trained them in faith, are finding it very difficult to move outwith the natural pool of safe close friendships and have an impact in the community world, outside of the church.

Now, that's got me asking a lot of questions – particularly about the world of church youth work. Let me be clear, I do not wish to be critical. I do think that there is a valuable place for church youth work – I very much want to emphasise that – but I think we've got big questions about what this church culture is that we are always schooling our young children and people in. The fundamental question is, however: is it working?

You can look at statistics across the church and by the time young adults are reaching the ages of between 20 and 30 in most Scottish churches (there are exceptions I do recognise) this cohort of 20 to 30-year-olds has started to decline. This is a missing generation. If they have come up through the system of children's work and Sunday schools but are not staying within church culture, is there something in what we are doing at an earlier stage that has failed to build up their faith? Is there some kind of fault in our practice that has meant they are now staying away from church? So, I do have big questions. Is there something that we have to re-examine in what we are doing at the youth end of the spectrum? And if we do need to do things differently what would they be? I'm not sure. But this seminar is a good place to ask these questions.

I also have big questions about being young in itself. Let me say something about those that may have been schooled in the Christian church tradition. That is, of course, not a bad thing. I'm a parent and I understand that I want to protect and preserve faith and encourage my children to have a faith. But isn't there something really valuable in reflecting about what it is to be a young person? To be an adolescent actually involves risk-taking and involves a rite of passage. Young people can test out identities, they can test out boundaries, and test out for themselves the personal question – who am I? And, what actually do I believe? Do I have other experiences that would act as a comparison with what it is to have a faith or not to have a faith? How would I compare the two? Adolescence is a time of trial and error. Yet, by encouraging our young people to only live in and inhabit the Christian sphere are we actually limiting their capacity to own their faith in later life? Again, I am not sure – but I do have a big question relating to the idea of risk. Do we actually minimise the ability of young people to go and take risks? Risks that we wouldn't think are socially or morally appropriate. Do we actually curtail their behaviour in ways that are maybe not so positive in the long term?

In relation to this, I also think there's a lot of pressure on those who are employed within the church, and what it is they're actually being asked to do. By the sheer fact that that they are employed within the church – what is the church implicitly asking them to do? The nature

and purpose of youth work isn't necessarily to retain young people within the church structure – but a lot of the time that is the unspoken or unwritten expectation. The pressure on a youth worker within the church is, therefore, immense, but little considered or spoken about. There is, in addition, the pressure of parents. Parents often bring pressure to bear on youth workers through their expectation that their children will navigate adolescence safely. That might mean that they don't get pregnant, they don't start smoking, they don't binge drink, and they don't take drugs.

These are, in reality, the unspoken things that we are asking our youth workers to do on our behalf. And actually a youth worker might feel at odds with this, asking: Do I feel this is part of my job? Do I bow to such pressure? Do I continue to re-do what we've always done? i.e. 'We've always had a youth club and we've always held the Youth Fellowship during the service' and so on. Churches often feel the need to tick the boxes of the youth worker's job description at their annual reviews, since these things are considered to be part of that work. The youth worker's role in all of this brings with it, then, a huge amount of tension we are actually never explicit about. That's just one aspect of it, along with the fact that the structure isn't working as well as it once did. But then, the big question: *What is the alternative?*

How, for example, do we train young people to think missionally? How we do that I'm not entirely sure. We want young people to have a faith. We want them to understand that they actually have a place in the kingdom. If you ask young people, 'Do you have any idea of what you would like to do? How you would like to be involved in church life?' they will usually say, 'I don't know!' That's the reality. There are a lot of well-meaning folk who say, 'We just want to embrace you in our church community' – but when we ask young folk what they want they say, 'We don't know' – and are not that bothered.

I think that this leads into a really difficult and complex part of what it is we are doing with young people. How might this affect the next generation? How can we make a difference? And how can we encourage young people to have a faith that is their own? How do we give them a sense of identity, let them know that they are loved and are part of God's kingdom? It's not a simple thing but I think sometimes

if we say we want to see change we actually need to take a big step back and ask: This thing we've got going on ... is it working? And ... I'm not so sure.

So that's where I'm coming from. In all honesty, I do think that youth workers and young people have a huge capacity to make a difference in our churches and that's the premise I'm starting from. But how do we do it? I realise that everyone has a completely different context. There is not a one-size-fits-all answer. But the questions about how we view youth work, how we view the role of a youth worker remain.

In truth, for some, getting and employing a youth worker is the answer. It's really not the answer at all, however. To conclude: I think that there needs to be *a fundamental cultural mind-shift about what it is that we want to see happening.*